The Classroom Innovation – The Marshmallow Challenge

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The Marshmallow Challenge is a team building exercise used in the business sector that I have modified to use in my class to encourage cohesiveness among students assigned to work together on a group project. Typically, there will be 4-5 students per team. Each team is provided a Ziplock bag containing the same items: 20 spaghetti sticks; 3 feet of yarn; 3 feet of masking or duct tape; a pair of scissors, and 1 single marshmallow.

Teams are given 18 minutes to build the tallest free-standing tower that they can. The caveat is that they may only use the items found in the Ziplock bag. They may alter all materials provided except for the marshmallow. For example, they may cut the yarn and/or tape and they may break the spaghetti sticks. The marshmallow on the other hand, must remain intact and must be placed at the top of the tower in the end.

It is interesting to observe how different groups go about completing the task. I enjoy being surprised by the creativity of groups and the healthy competition that ensues as teams try to beat the clock and outdo their classmates. I usually play music of their choice while they are working together.

When time is up, I measure the height of all towers to determine the team that has built the tallest structure. After this, I do a debrief to encourage reflection on the process they have just gone through and its relation to the group project assignment.

Some ideas on the value of the exercise that typically come out of this discussion include:

- Brainstorming
- Planning
- Assumptions are not always correct
- Collaboration
- Creativity
- Innovation
- Learn from Failures
- Making the best of the resources you have

I find that this activity serves as a great way to warm team members up to working with each other on the group project. It also gives them ideas on group dynamics and on what to expect as they work with others to achieve a tangible goal. The activity and subsequent discussion set the table for groups to begin their initial brainstorming for the group project.